

“Thanksgiving: The Uniquely American Holiday”
Psalm 107
November 2017

How many of you are thankful today? Well Thanksgiving is the one uniquely American holiday. But have you noticed that it is fading? Whatever happened to Thanksgiving? Have you noticed that the store colors and décor changes from Orange and Black to Red and Green overnight? They trade the pumpkins and witches for Santa and Christmas trees. In fact, now there’s no wait, and they are all mixed together. So for most Americans, Thanksgiving is becoming little more than a “speed bump” between Halloween and Christmas. This year more and more businesses will be open on Thanksgiving. It is becoming the vanishing holiday, isn’t it? My wife has shown me picture after picture on her Facebook feed of folks who have had their Christmas decorations up for weeks! I recently saw a cartoon that had a Pilgrim husband and wife getting ready for Thanksgiving dinner with the turkey on the table, but the wife is now busy putting up a Christmas tree. The husband asks: “Can that at least wait until after dinner?” Good question!

Yet Scripture encourages us to give thanks for the Providential goodness of God: “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!... Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things... Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!” (Psalm 107:1, 8-9, 15 ESV).

The tradition Thanksgiving as a time to focus on God and His blessings dates back over 400 years in America. For example, such thanksgivings observances occurred in:

- 1541 at Palo Duro Canyon, Texas with Coronado and 1,500 of his men;
- 1564 at St. Augustine, Florida with French Huguenot (Protestant) colonists;
- 1598 at El Paso, Texas with Juan de Oñate and his expedition;
- 1607 at Cape Henry, Virginia with the landing of the Jamestown settlers;
- 1619 at Berkeley Plantation, Virginia;¹

So there were a several times and places where groups of European Christians gave thanks after the discovery and early settlement of America, but it is primarily from the Pilgrim’s Thanksgiving celebration of 1621 that we get our current tradition of Thanksgiving Day.

You remember their story. The Pilgrims were basically a part of an independent church that separated from the Church of England, and met secretly in a town called Scrooby. King James I demanded that breakaway groups like theirs conform to the official church of he would: “Harry them out of the land.” Well, the Pilgrims left England in search of religious freedom and re-established their church in Holland. But after their young people began to be lured away by the wickedness there, their Pastor, John Robinson, prayerfully led the church to consider re-locating the church in the New World of America.

After several setbacks, the first group of church members joined with a group of adventurers and set sail for America on September 6, 1620 in the Mayflower. For two months they braved the harsh elements and storm-tossed sea, missed their target of Virginia, and landed at Cape Cod in

what is now Massachusetts. Before they disembarked, they huddled beneath the deck and drafted a self-governing document they called the Mayflower Compact that begins: “In the Name of God” and gave this reason for their coming: “For the Glory of God and the Advancement of the Christian Faith.”² William Bradford described the Pilgrims' thankfulness when they disembarked:

Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed ye God of heaven who had brought them over ye vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all ye periles & miseries therof, againe to set their feete on ye firme and stable earth, their proper elemente... What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace?”³

After trying to sail south to Virginia and being rebuffed by strong winds, the Pilgrims prayed and discerned that God would have them settle where they had originally landed in what is now Provincetown Harbor. Already December by this point, they hastily began building shelters, beginning with the “common” or meeting house on Christmas Day.⁴ However, they were not prepared for such a harsh New England winter, and nearly half of the Pilgrims died before spring.⁵

When spring came they were out of food. In March, an Indian named Samoset surprised the Pilgrims by greeting them in English, which he had learned from traders on fishing expeditions. A week later, Samoset returned with Squanto, a former captive of English slave traders, who had taken him to Spain, where a monk reportedly rescued him and taught him the Christian faith. Squanto eventually made his way to England and then back to America in 1619, a year before the Pilgrims would arrive. When Squanto returned to his native village, he found that everyone had been wiped out by a plague – no doubt brought to them by English traders. He was one of the last Patuxet Indians in America.⁶

Well this was his chance for revenge, but instead, Squanto came and offered them his services. Now remember, the Pilgrims were craftsmen and townspeople in England, with little experience as farmers or hunters. In four months time they had caught only one codfish. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to provide for the necessities of life, including how to fish for cod, how to plant corn with a fish, stalk deer, plant pumpkins, skin beavers, and what berries were edible.⁷

So here was this Native American who understood English fluently, he understood English customs and ways, he ate English foods, and he became committed to the same Christ. He was the right man, at the right place, at the right time. Only God can do that. Squanto's story is not unlike Joseph in the Old Testament. He was shaped and molded through suffering and slavery to be the instrument of God to literally keep the people of God alive. Governor Bradford described Squanto as “a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.”⁸

And Squanto not only taught the Pilgrims much about how to live in the New World, he and Samoset helped forge a long-lasting peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians, their adoptive tribe.⁹ In the fall of 1621, the Pilgrims gathered a bountiful harvest. They invited their Indian friends for a Thanksgiving celebration. Pilgrim Edward Winslow records: “Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling (turkey hunting), so that we

might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors.”¹⁰ Then he describes their thanksgiving for God’s providential provision: “God be praised, we had a good increase of corn... by the goodness of God, we are far from want...”¹¹

So the grateful Pilgrims declared a three-day feast in December 1621 to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends, which is the event widely recognized as America’s first Thanksgiving Festival. Ninety Wampanoag Indians joined the Plymouth settlers for three days of feasting (which included shellfish, lobsters, turkey, corn bread, berries, deer, and other foods), of play (the young Pilgrim and Wampanoag men engaged in races, wrestling matches, and athletic events), and of prayer.¹² As was their custom, Elder William Brewster would have led them in a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His goodness. This celebration and its accompanying activities were the origin of the holiday that Americans now celebrate each November.

The Pilgrim practice of designating an official time of Thanksgiving spread into neighboring colonies and became an annual tradition.¹³ The Massachusetts Bay colony and neighboring colonies followed the Pilgrims’ example of calling for days of thanksgiving. They also adopted their practice of calling for times of prayer and fasting. The New England colonies typically called for a day of prayer and fasting in the spring and a day of prayer and thanksgiving in the fall.

Although Thanksgiving celebrations were common throughout New England, they did not begin to spread southward until the War for Independence, when the Continental Congress issued eight proclamations for a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer. It is also worth mentioning that the same Congress also issued seven proclamations for a Day of Fasting and Prayer, for a total of 15 official prayer proclamations during the American Revolution.¹⁴ For example, following the amazing victory at Saratoga, a congressional committee consisting of two signers of the Declaration of Independence, Richard Henry Lee and Samuel Adams, along with General Daniel Roberdeau, recommended the following resolution on November 1, 1777:

Forasmuch as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to Him for benefits received and to implore such further blessing as they stand in need of; and it having pleased Him in His abundant mercy not only to continue to us the innumerable bounties of His common Providence... It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive powers of these United States, to set apart Thursday, the eighteenth day of December next, for the solemn thanksgiving and praise:

That with one heart and one voice the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their Divine Benefactor; and that together with their sincere acknowledgements and offerings, they may join the penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favour, and their humble and earnest supplication that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance;...

That it may please Him, to prosper the trade and manufactures of the people, and the labour of the husbandman, that our land may yet yield its increase; to take school and

seminaries of education, so necessary for cultivating the principles of true liberty, virtue and piety, under His nurturing hand, and to prosper the means of religion for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consisteth “in righteous, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.”¹⁵

America’s first national Thanksgiving proclamation under the U.S. Constitution was made in 1789 with the commencement of the federal government. On the day after the Framers of the Bill of Rights voted to approve them, the Congressional Record for September 25 relates:

Mr. [Elias] Boudinot said he could not think of letting the session pass without offering an opportunity to all the citizens of the United States of joining with one voice in returning to Almighty God their sincere thanks for the many blessings He had poured down upon them. With this view, therefore, he would move the following resolution:

“Resolved, That a joint committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States a Day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer. . . .”

Mr. [Roger] Sherman justified the practice of thanksgiving on any single event not only as a laudable one in itself but also as warranted by a number of precedents in Holy Writ: for instance, the solemn thanksgivings and rejoicings which took place in the time of Solomon after the building of the temple was a case in point. This example he thought worthy of a Christian imitation on the present occasion...¹⁶

In response to the congressional resolution, President George Washington issued the first federal Thanksgiving proclamation on October 3, 1789, declaring in part:

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and

Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me ‘to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness;’

Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the twenty-sixth day of November next, to be devoted by the People of these United States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be;

That we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks, for His kind care and protection of the People of this country...; for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of His Providence...¹⁷

Following this initial proclamation, national Thanksgiving proclamations approved by Congress and issued by the President occurred only sporadically thereafter.¹⁸ Most Thanksgiving observances were proclaimed by civil authorities at the state level. By 1820, the various state governments had issued at least 1,400 official prayer proclamations, almost half for times of thanksgiving and prayer and the other half for times of fasting and prayer, following the pattern set in early New England.¹⁹

Credit for the adoption of Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday mostly goes to Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular women's publication. For nearly three decades, Hale promoted the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day to president after president, without success, until President Abraham Lincoln responded to her request in 1863, setting aside the last Thursday of that November as a national "Day of Thanksgiving and Praise."

The Thanksgiving proclamation issued by Lincoln was remarkable not only for its strong religious content but also for its timing. It was issued during some of the darkest days of the Civil War, with the Union having lost more battles than they had won, and the outcome of the war still very much uncertain. Yet Lincoln called the American people to adopt the attitude of gratitude:

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the Source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God. . . . No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, Who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy...²⁰

This poignant Thanksgiving Proclamation came just three months after the Battle of Gettysburg, resulting in the loss of some 60,000 American lives. Over the years following Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation, nearly every American president faithfully followed Lincoln's precedent, annually declaring a national Thanksgiving Day (but the date of the celebrations varied widely from proclamation to proclamation). In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began celebrating Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of each November, and in 1941, Congress permanently established that day as the national Thanksgiving holiday.²¹

Let's go back to the Pilgrims for one final story. The Pilgrims planted their crops in the spring of 1623, anticipating another bountiful harvest, but summer brought a severe drought, "which continued from ye 3 week in May till about ye middle of July without any rain and with great heat for y most part insomuch as ye corn began to wither away."²² With no rain in sight and their crops dying, Governor William Bradford "set apart a solemn day of humiliation to seek ye Lord by humble & fervent prayer in this great distress."²³

Everyone gathered in the meeting house early and spent that clear, hot day in repentance and prayer. When they opened the doors of the meeting house that evening, the skies were cloudy,

and then it began to rain a gently soaking rain on and off for the next two weeks, which gave them cause for “rejoicing & blessing God.”²⁴ As Governor Bradford explained:

It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in abundance, as that ye earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith, which did so apparently revive and quicken ye decayed corn and other fruits as was wonderful to see, and made ye Indians astonished to behold; and afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing.²⁵

During that “lean year,” before the harvest came in, the ration was reportedly five kernels of corn per person. However, with the abundance of rain, Edward Winslow records that they had a great harvest that October.²⁶ So they had another Thanksgiving festival with the Natives, inviting Chief Massasoit and the Wampanoags. This time they came with 120 braves and all their women and children, and they had another tremendous time of feasting and celebrating. But before they filled their plates with all that God had blessed them with, the Pilgrims reportedly placed five kernels of corn on each plate as a reminder of God’s goodness, lest they should forget.²⁷

As you celebrate Thanksgiving this week, don’t forget to take time to genuinely and sincerely thank God for all His many blessings, material and spiritual, which has always been the spirit of this – the uniquely American holiday.

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¹ See <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=17984> for all the historical reference notes on Thanksgiving celebrations before that of the Pilgrims in 1621.

² William Bradford, *Bradford’s History “Of Plimoth Plantation:” From the Original Manuscript with a Report of the Proceedings Incident to the Return of the Manuscript to Massachusetts* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1898), 110.

³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 114-119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰ Dwight Heath, ed., *Mourt’s Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1963), 82, which contains Edward Winslow’s letter written to George Morton of London on December 21, 1621.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See DeLoss Love, Jr, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1895), 87-90.

¹⁴ See the online version of the *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789*, 34 vols., (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1907-37) at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwjc/link.html> and search for June 12, 1775; March 16, 1776; December 11, 1776; November 1, 1777; March 7, 1778; November 17, 1778; March 20,

1779; October 20, 1779; March 11, 1780; October 18, 1780; March 20, 1781; October 26, 1781; March 19, 1782; October 11, 1782; October 18, 1783.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9:854-855.

¹⁶ Joseph Gales, Sr., comp., *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 1:949-50. Hereafter, *Annals of Congress*.

¹⁷ Jared Sparks, ed., *The Writings of George Washington; being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and Other Papers, Official and Private, Selected and Published from the original Manuscripts*, 12 vols. (Boston: American Stationer's Company, 1837), 12:119.

¹⁸ See examples provided by H. S. J. Sickel, *Thanksgiving: Its Source, Philosophy and History With All National Proclamations* (Philadelphia: International Printing Co, 1940), such as "Thanksgiving Day 1795" by George Washington, 156-157; "Thanksgiving Day 1798" by John Adams, 158-159; "Thanksgiving Day 1799" by John Adams, 160; "Thanksgiving Day 1814" by James Madison, 161; "Thanksgiving Day 1815" by James Madison, 162, etc.

¹⁹ David Barton cites Deloss Love, in his work *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England*, who lists some 1,735 proclamations issued between 1620 and 1820, in a non-exclusive list. Of those, 284 were issued by churches and 1,451 by civil authorities. See <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=17984> at note 19.

²⁰ Roy P. Basler, Jr., ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 6:496-97.

²¹ David Barton cites the following at note 23: The National Archives, "Congress Establishes Thanksgiving" (at: <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/thanksgiving/>); see also Pilgrim Hall Museum, "Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations 1940-1949: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman" (at: <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/ThanxProc1940.htm>), Proclamation 2571: Days of Prayer: Thanksgiving Day and New Year's Day, November 11, 1942, referring to a "joint resolution of Congress approved December 26, 1941, which designates the fourth Thursday in November of each year as Thanksgiving Day."

²² Bradford, 170.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Edward Winslow, *Good Newes From New England: A True Relation of Things Very Remarkable at the Plantation of Plimoth in New England* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1624/ND), 54-55. Corroborated by Bradford, 127.

²⁷ Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1977), 144.